

*THE MATRIX: A METAPHORICAL PARALELL TO LANGUAGE*

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis gives a brief synopsis of the 1999 blockbuster *The Matrix*, and will argue that, from a deconstructionist's perspective, the *matrix* in the film is a metaphorical parallel to that of language. The thesis elucidates meanings and applications of various codes used to perpetuate this metaphor in the film, and also quantifies the film as belonging to the genre of the fantastic, which sets the most applicable stage for the parallel. The thesis then articulates this parallel by drawing connections from instances portrayed in the film to the way people's perception of reality is affected by the meaning-making process.

## *THE MATRIX: A METAPHORICAL PARALLEL TO LANGUAGE*

Morpheus – “Do you know what I’m talking about?”

Neo – “The matrix?”

Morpheus – “The matrix is everywhere [...] It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you to the truth.”

Neo – “What truth?”

Morpheus – “That you are a slave [...] born into a prison for your mind.”

*The Matrix*  
Warner Brothers, 1999

We live a lie. Humans live in a false reality, a false consciousness, a dream world, a fantasy. This false reality could take the form of social casts wherein certain rules are imposed or freedoms granted that are otherwise not. It could take the form of a political entity wherein certain liberties are upheld and economic initiatives employed that may not exist outside of it. Similarly, each religion of the world can be said to be a microcosm of constructed realities, each with its own implementations of how to perceive and define the world around each of its adherents. Essentially, this means that things exist as a consequence that are not necessarily natural to this world.

In trying to become more grounded in reality, the human race has attempted to develop a system of categorization to describe the world around us. These attempts, according to Jorge J. E. Garcia and Jonathan J. Sanford in their essay “The Metaphysics of *The Matrix*,” however, “are fraught with difficulties”

due to the “very conceptual frameworks embedded in the ordinary ways in which we think about the world” (58). The problem arises, according to Garcia and Sanford, in attempting to define and categorize the world around us, is that “often [...] the things to which the conceptual frameworks correspond are themselves very complex” (58). Therefore, the relevance *The Matrix* has to do with bridging the stretch between false reality and language is that “the questions posed by *The Matrix* take the form of the paradigmatic metaphysical question [...] What is appearance and what is reality? What is it that separates them?” (56).

The 1999 Warner Brothers science fiction film *The Matrix* tells the story of our world in a distant and obscure future run by computers that have captured and imprisoned nearly all of humanity in the false reality of a virtual world referred to as the *matrix*. The virtual reality world of the film works to create what is described by Daniel Barwick, in his essay “Neo-Materialism and the Death of the Subject,” a “brain state” wherein “those who are caught in its grip have no idea that their mental states do not correspond to anything real” (77). Because the plot is based on the premise that the world as we know it is not objectively real but a computer simulation (the *matrix*) wired into our minds by a species of artificial intelligence, the film employs “the view that mental states can be reduced physical states,” (75). Since, according to the essay “The Machine-Made Ghost,” written by Jason Holt, “objects look different from different angles,” since they “occupy points of perspective,” it is essential for the metaphor

of the film/language parallel to “bridge the gap between consciousness and the neural goings-on responsible for it” (73).

Language. According to Barwick, “our reference to mental states is a product of the development of language” (80). In much the same way that the Artificial Intelligence that was originally created by human technological know how is indistinguishable from the false reality it creates in the film, so too is the false reality of a logocentric language and the meaning-making process by which we acquire it—by which we are programmed with it. I will reveal this parallel by analyzing the narrative and cinematic elements of the film, drawing connections from what is portrayed in the film to the way people’s perception of reality is affected by language and the meaning-making process.

Using the paradigmatic elements of fantasy, pop-culture, and religious allusions, the level of narration is constructed to convey meanings and build expectations in a seemingly traditional sense. Philosophy—the type of philosophical existence represented in *The Matrix*—says William Irwin, editor of *The Matrix and Philosophy* “is everywhere; it is relevant to and can illuminate everyone's life” (2). Therefore, the answer as to why the use of pop-culture as part of the medium of the message is easily answered--“People like popular culture; it is the common language of our time [...] Because that's where the people are” (2). Paradigmatic elements translate into cinematic codes, which are simply vehicles for meaning, when discussing how when discussing how they are

employed in the mechanics of the film to affect meaning. Hyperkinetic pseudo-superhuman fight scenes, like the one with which the film opens make one think, “oh, a superhero movie,” which, to a great degree, it is. The messianic images contribute to the superhero idea, while also adding other dimensions—morality, humanity, apocalypse, and so on. The virtual plethora of pop-culture references seem to be guideposts helping us keep our bearings as we attempt to navigate what we believe to be the meaning of the film. All the while, we are formulating interpretations the way we've always been taught/programmed to do.

It is essential to establish the ambiguity of ‘meaning,’ and say there are a virtual plethora of meanings and as many modes one may use to arrive at them. In imposing upon language a structure that allows us to grasp its immensity and utilize it for communication, we have allowed a formulaic way in which we view language to prescribe the way in which we perceive the world around us. This pattern has resulted in a finite conceptualization and utilization of language in relation to the virtual infinite-like nature of language. The end result is that the *matrix* of the film begins to emerge as a metaphorical parallel to that of language. The areas of association upon which this metaphorical parallel is constructed are those of acquisition, internalization and externalization, and utilization.

The film is presented from a poststructuralist's perspective, a text-oriented approach meant to undermine the either/or logic of the opposition-oriented logic of the binary approach. Therefore the unique feature of *The Matrix* is that at the

moment the expected should come to pass, the surreal or contradictory nature of the code is employed—collapsing and imploding their meanings upon one another, forcing the viewer to second-guess the code's meaning. For example, the hero of the typical action movie has generally been a cop or some other agent of law enforcement. This expectation is built up in one of the opening scenes of the film in which Agent Smith arrives at a crime scene cordoned off and swarming with uniformed cops. The scene for a gritty cop-drama is being set, with irreverent 'jurisdictional' banter between cop and apparent federal agent. The expectation, however, is countered when Trinity, played by Carrie-Ann Moss, goes from presumed cyber-criminal, i.e. bad, to bad-ass ass-kicking in the span of seconds. Though, throughout the film, the cop-drama feel is maintained, form only partially fits content, as the hyperkinetic ass-kicking turns into a roof-top chase scene wherein it becomes just as possible to leap from one tall building to another in a single bound as it is to disappear into the receiver of a telephone. Both happen, and it's only the opening minutes of the film.

Maintaining the idea that language is form, not substance, we must remember that these codes are employed to infuse the *language* of the *text* with the power of meaning. This meaning is further used to tell a story. In *The Matrix* what is seen and how this media is presented is given just as important a role as a signifying element to the film's deeper meaning as the dialogue. The storytelling norm is that the dialogue carries virtually all the meaning; by empowering other



storytelling elements with equal or greater meaning—conveying power, *The Matrix* “destabilizes” the narrative constraint of language on a text. The story still exists as the sequential assembly of a series of static moments—it's still one scene after another strung together for storytelling purposes—but it also manages to simultaneously maintain the capacity to exist within and without the text.

Every scene of the film makes evident the correlation between the false reality of a logocentric language can and those of dreamscapes, of sleeping, that of the realm of fantasy that is the *matrix*. The idea that *The Matrix* is a metaphor of language is made evident in the first minute of the film as the camera zooms ever closer to the code scrolling across the screen; the code dissolves and the image transmorphs into that of the beam of a police officer's flashlight. This scene shift, and many others like it that follow, serves to take the viewer from outside the *matrix* looking in to inside the *matrix* itself. It makes plausible the argument of how seamless the shift between reality and false reality is.

Being unplugged from the hardware of the *matrix* that has kept its prisoners subsisting within its belly of mechanisms, programming them with the virtual reality lie that everything in the world as they know it—there in the late-twentieth century—is okay, and experiencing the world as it truly is, unencumbered by false programming, is the ultimate goal of the band of rebels in the film. The poststructuralist perspective being conveyed on another narrative level altogether is the awakening to the idea the finite structure we perceive there to be in language is a lie we have perpetrated on ourselves.

This plot device correlates very closely to the parallel of language as sociologist, Peter Berger, asserts in his book *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, that the inherited worldview of any culture or society is a created one (79). Humans do not come into the world with a given relationship to it—we create our purpose and impose our own significance upon the world. The use of language, Berger cites, in the initial outpouring of our concepts onto the world to construct our own socio-cultural reality, is the primary example of constructed reality (102). Through the process of “objectivation” of the externalized reality, we experience the reality around us—the one we have constructed—as though it has always been there, and forget that we actually created it ourselves. Finally, the “internalization” of the objectified reality is the process by which each of us individually and as a society is “socialized” by a certain worldview; education, ritual, and upbringing all facilitate this internalization. Consequently, people mistake the “material” world for something real.

The discourse of the *matrix* is one of subjugation—control through the construction of a variety of paradigms. This discourse is made manifest in the film's metonymies, such as that of Agent Smith, Neo, Thomas Anderson's job at Metacortex, the *matrix* itself, and the religious allusions intertwined with the idea of destiny that is the film's overarching messianic theme. Many times throughout the film, it is asserted that the way the world works has been designed in such a way that a person is kept occupied and content enough that they remain apathetic

to the reality that exists around them, and that this inadvertent development is the consequence of human advancement. Humans developed machines as tools to make their lives easier, much the way humans have developed language as a tool to make communication easier. The adverse and perverse culmination of these achievements, the film hands us on a silver platter very early in the film when we meet Thomas Anderson for the first time.

Along with being a seeker of the truth of what the *matrix* is, Neo is also an employee of Metacortex—“one of the largest software companies in the world,” and he also pirates illegal software on the black market. When Choi comes knocking at his door, Neo refers to a hollowed out copy of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulations*, inside of which he keeps his software *simulations*. According to Baudrillard, simulation “is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (166). Neo does not yet know it, but he has not yet ever known the difference that, according to Baudrillard “forms the poetry of the map and the charm of the territory, the magic of the concept and the charm of the real” (166). Since Neo, and every other human currently living in the *matrix* has only ever known the reality of the *matrix*, for them “representational imaginary—the map and the territory—disappears with simulation, whose operation is nuclear and genetic, and no longer specular and discursive” (166). In fact, this “hyperreality... no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance” (167). In order to help the audience arrive at this awareness, the Wachowski Brothers take us to “a space

whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor of truth”; this by way of “a liquidation of all referentials” where a metonymy can have its traditional meaning and simultaneously have a contradicting meaning. This action optimizes the “artificial resurrection in systems of signs, which are a more ductile material than meaning, in that they lend themselves to all systems of equivalence, all binary oppositions and all combinatory algebra” suggesting the malleability of meaning (167).

While the minds of humans are imprisoned, their bodies are kept in incubators and used for energy. Morpheus, played by Lawrence Fishburne, is the leader of a small band of humans who are free of the *matrix*, and live to fight the subjugation of humankind. The name Morpheus comes from the mythological god of dreams, which seems to fit the surreal nature of events that begin to unfold upon his entrance into Neo's life. The poststructuralist twist is the fact that Morpheus is the one who facilitates Neo's awakening into “the real world.” Another icon Morpheus represents in the underlying messianic theme is that of John the Baptist. Like the Biblical figure, Morpheus foretells the end of human bondage with the coming of one that is greater than he. Though Morpheus almost immediately defers to Neo's potential, his wisdom and insight into the nature of the *matrix* is unsurpassed as he articulates the current human condition decisively when he explains that, “They built a prison out of our past, wired it into our brains and turned us into slaves” (*The Matrix*).

Neo, also an anagram of the “One”, played by Keanu Reeves, is led to Morpheus, who is convinced Neo is the *one*—the saviour of humankind. Along with other anagrams for his name like *new* and *bright* are the messianic meanings attributed to his pre-awakened identity—Thomas Anderson. The name Anderson means the son of man, which, in an age where man is at war with machines, is a little more than pertinent. It indicates that even though he is machine-born and raised, he will fight and die for the cause of humankind. The name Thomas is reminiscent of one of Christ's apostles—the one who doubted Christ's divinity until, after Christ's resurrection, Thomas was able to put his hands into the holes where the nails were placed. Similarly, Neo continues to doubt his own potential—it is only when he has risen from the place where he once lay dead and caused bullets fired at him to halt and fall harmlessly to the ground that he fully understands reality and his place in it. It is the process of reflection and introspection—cinematically portrayed by the fighting and culminating in his death—that finally enables Neo to discover the otherwise hidden meaning of the *matrix*, and ultimately afford him the power of free thought.

The metaphorical parallel between the *matrix* and that of language rests on the notion that paradigms based on a logocentric-oriented language are simulations that infect every facet of human thought with a false sense of reality. To this end, Baudrillard asserts that “ideology only corresponds to a betrayal of reality by signs; simulation corresponds to a short-circuit of reality and to its reduplication by signs” (182). Before Neo is awakened to the illusion around

him, he is powerless amid the paradigms marginalizing participants into little more than sheep in a cycle of illusion. So thoroughly enmeshed is this film's metaphor in the real world, Gerald J. Erion and Barry Smith affirm in their essay *Skepticism, Morality, and The Matrix* that indeed, “Some philosophers have even claimed that we might ourselves be caught up in a *Matrix*-like world of unrelenting illusion” (17). A great example of this is made the morning after Neo has been out late pursuing a lead to the truth about the *matrix*, and is subsequently late for work.

Neo’s boss, Mr. Rhineheart, brings Neo into his office. Visually, meaning is immediately conveyed: the office is so pristine it is stuffy, window washers labor in a dangerous environment an inch outside of the opulence of the office, and they clear soapy water from the window, the suds of which actually resemble the *matrix* code. With Mr. Rhineheart sitting comfortably and Neo standing nervously, the scene is set and the constrictive nature of life is vividly conveyed—the *matrix* has you. Mr. Rhineheart begins in a tone devoid of anything save apathy, to verbally browbeat Neo into submission: “You have a problem with authority, Mr. Anderson. You believe that you are special; that somehow the rules do not apply to you [...]” Mr. Rhineheart goes on to explain that Metacortex is “one of the largest software companies in the world” because “every single employee understands that they are part of a whole”(*The Matrix*).

Linguistically, this is representative of a form of indoctrination, or perpetual re-indoctrination by way of Peter Berger's aforementioned socio-

cultural construction. The *matrix* is showing one of its citizens how it is to perceive the world in which they live, and their appropriate place in it. Mr. Rhineheart continues by attempting to perpetuate conformity to the paradigm by dictating terms of existence that allow no flexibility within: “It is time for you to make a choice Mr. Anderson...” (*The Matrix*). This scene is a textual embodiment of Baudrillard's assertion that “work has subtly become {...} a need {...}, the object of a social 'demand.' The scenario of work is there to conceal the fact that the work-real, the production-real, has disappeared” (181).

A little later in the film, Neo is captured by Agent Smith, played by Hugo Weaving. At the open of the scene, the cinematic technique is again employed that has the effect of hybridizing the cinematic code, which includes set production and camera angles, and the enigmatic code, which is the riddle of what the *matrix* really is. The film camera fixes on a panel of security monitors displaying the image of Neo in an interrogation room. The shot moves closer and tighter until it seems to penetrate the screen holding Neo's image, actually becoming the screen with Neo's image on it. This has the effect of confusing real locations with virtual simulacra, a turning on itself of common experience which serves to enunciate the indeterminacy of the text. The blurring of the boundaries between the cinematic codes and the enigmatic codes keeps the viewer oblivious to the moments of visual rupture which could otherwise remind her/him of external reality. The camera and computer become virtually indistinguishable

from one another as one medium is seamlessly overlaid onto another, through the digital effects that technology makes possible.

In Roland Barthes' essay "Rhetoric of the Image," he explains that moving images draw the viewer in and inherently postpone any critical reading (and by reading I also mean viewing, which, like reading is a mode by which perception and interpretation takes place) (19). We must consider a film as a unique signifying system, broken down into component parts as static images. The viewer is inundated by carefully constructed images at the level of symbolic representation, understood as vertical associations. The static nature of *The Matrix*'s structure does not exist solely as a convention to move the story forward. Instead, the structure functions as yet another expression of the cumulative plane, an extreme declaration whereby metaphor and metonymy become seemingly indistinguishable. The presentation of references using codes builds expectations among the reader, which foreground the formal status of each moment of the film. The fact that these references are presented in such an erratic manner problematizes the principles of structuralism.

Barthes insists on the primary authority of the linguistic message, the function of which is to always serve as an "anchor" or a "relay" for all other signs (28). Dialogue stands for both writing and speech, and carries the bulk of the informational structure of a film, providing the parameters of the meaning within which the signifying work of the cinematic text can unfold. A problem arises



with Barthes' theory when this conception of a signifying hierarchy all but disappears in *The Matrix*, and the relationship between image and text or figure become ambiguous.

Barthes also contends that “the image is an area of resistance to meaning” (19). Contemplation of the iconic representation is always contingent upon its relationship with other signifying elements within the system. This concept is grounded in the discernment of inconsistency between the logical and the experimental. Interpreting the text consists of confronting and overcoming what Barthes terms “the terror of uncertain signs;” this diminishes the relevance of engaging in the process of *identification*, which, he asserts, proceeds interpretation and limits its implied meanings. The image, therefore, has full play as a system of signs to carry multiple meanings, in a process of deferral (difference). Visual effects such as “Bullet Time” will be discussed later in this paper as being more prominent examples of the full play of images in this film.

When Smith enters the interrogation room, intimidatingly flanked by other agents, he seems to spout the same rhetoric as Mr. Rhineheart, and allows Neo an equally static space within the reality he occupies. Agent Smith confronts Neo with his duality: “It seems you’ve been living two lives. In one life you’re Thomas A. Anderson, program writer [...] You have a social security number, you pay our taxes, and you help your landlady carry out her garbage.” Here, Agent Smith is listing qualities of acceptable behavior—he is actually listing some of the major paradigms of the late twentieth century. “The other is lived in

computers [...] One of these lives has a future, and one of these does not [...] We're willing to wipe the slate clean [...] All that we're asking in return is your cooperation..." (*The Matrix*).

Agent Smith allows Neo a space within reality, rigidly fixed and affording no "free play" in meaning making, hence no open ended exploration for identity and self-expression for Neo within the world he currently occupies. Also, as a matter of form fitting substance, Agent Smith's words are calculated—almost benign—and are delivered with an equally cold monotone. The rhetoric of the world—or "lives"—Agent Smith is attempting to administer is one of "cooperation," one where Neo is conforming to a structure that has the benefit of the machines at its center. The problem with this, writes Jacques Derrida in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Science of Human Discourses," is that "the concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of freeplay based on a fundamental ground, a freeplay which is constituted upon a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which is itself beyond the reach of freeplay" (879). The structure of language was once formed for utilitarian purposes, and "the function of this center was {...} to orient, balance, and organize the structure" (878). The problem is, however, that the "structurality of structure...has always been neutralized or reduced {...} by a process of giving it a center or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the *freeplay* of its elements inside the total form" (878). Just as Neo discovers how

limited his freeplay is when he attempts to see answers that lay beyond the boundaries of the *matrix*, Derrida also asserts that “the center also closes off the freeplay it opens up and makes possible” (878).

If the world according to language is a strictly structured environment, then each of us, as individuals, are at the center of it, since we have, from the time of its inception, been the vessels of language. The lens through which many perceive this existence is colored by the Western tradition of logocentrism, where language is organized around a single center that can be ultimately identified and defined—a “matrix” if you will. This structure has tended to be based on binaries, which is a system of classification by which a group is perpetually divided into two, the one with a positive and the other with a negative character so that things come to be defined by its opposition to another thing. According to this system of classification, an immense ethereal T-chart is drawn in the air, while each thing with a positive is placed on one side, and each thing with a negative is placed on the other. Inherent in this thought is the system of hierarchies, where one thing can inevitably be defined as superior and the other as inferior. Inevitably, this also leads to the categorization of some things with good and others with bad, or evil, classifications.

If we buy into that kind of thinking, then we must give complete credibility to the notion of dichotomies, wherein, not only are all things conceived of in opposites, but we are also giving power to the idea of hierarchies in miniature where one thing is inevitably defined as superior and the other as

inferior. We are learning that language is not organized around a single center that can be ultimately identified and defined. The text is neither sphere with center or an unbroken line with an exact beginning and ending. The boundaries between any given text and the text of language itself are always shifting; it is not a unique, hermetically sealed space. The text can be seen as an immeasurable linguistic continuum in which we exist.

Such a limited grasp of the virtual infinite-like nature of language may be because we have imposed structure upon language that allows us to scope its immensity. It is also quite feasible that we have simply allowed the perfunctory view of language to prescribe the way we perceive our world, hence facilitating a false reality. Throwing into question the order and values implied by the opposition-based structure, *The Matrix* suggests the need to dissolve the boundaries between oppositions—it is these boundaries that imprison us. Fortunately for us, as with Neo, “language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique” (882). For us that moment is when we realize that language “was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play” (879). For Neo, it is when, demonstrating how a text can have multiple meanings, he responds with an alternative to Agent Smith's ultimatum, “Wow! That sounds like a really good deal. But I think I’ve got a better one—how about I give you the finger?” (*The Matrix*). Neo's reflection is captured in the lenses of Agent Smith's glasses throughout the interrogation, indicating a cinematic code for duality. Neo's proclamation is a

cinematic reflection of his dawning that he is the center of his own text and that it is well within the realm of feasibility that “the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it” (878). Once Neo asserts that he is not confined to the restrictions of a hermetically sealed text, he is thereafter captured as a single visage, representing another step toward his awakening or awareness.

Set in the context of *The Matrix* the A.I. software program that serves as a prison to virtually every human on earth is no illusion; however, it is only when humans *interact* with its programs that they become enmeshed in a corporately-created illusion--the *matrix*--which reinforces itself through the interactions of those beings involved within it. Prisoners of the *matrix* are trapped in a cycle of illusion, and their ignorance of this cycle keeps them locked in it, fully dependant upon their own interactions with the program and the illusions of sensory experience which these provide. These projections are strengthened by the prisoners’ enormous desire to believe that what they perceive to be real is in fact real.

With *The Matrix* set in the context of language, these conventions of the reality of the *matrix* to which Morpheus refers can easily be seen as the binary conventions of a logocentric language. An example of this is during the first meeting between Morpheus and Neo when the truth about the *matrix* is beginning to take shape. Neo's reflection, captured in Morpheus' glasses, once again indicate duality, but also of how removed from reality they both are given the context of their conversation. Even the pill box Morpheus twirls around gives the

setting a hint of the surreal—like what you speak is once removed from what you internalize, which is once removed from what is actually perceived, which may or may not be real in the first place. Morpheus first begins to explain to Neo that, “You are here because you know something. What you know you cannot explain, but you feel it {...} that there's something wrong with the world {...}. Do you know what I'm talking about?” While Neo's two-word answer, “The *matrix*,” is simple and concise, it also exemplifies how utterly beyond both comprehension and explanation it really is. Morpheus continues, “The *matrix* is everywhere. It is all around us, even now in this very room. You can see it when you look out your window, or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth” (*The Matrix*).

From the pill box Morpheus produces a red pill and a blue pill; one will lead him down the path of truth and awakening, and the other will perpetuate the dreamworld in which he has all along been living. With all the pop-culture references to guide our way, it is no wonder that the red and blue pills look exactly like Dayquil and Nyquil. Not surprisingly, Neo takes the red pill (Dayquil) and is propelled down the path of awakening and enlightenment, which results in the first actual conscious moments of his life being those in which he bears witness to the incubators that have kept him alive, have kept him imprisoned, and have programmed him with the false reality that is the virtual reality world of the *matrix*. It is that part of the *matrix* that has existed within him

and separate from him in order to imprison him. It is to the virtual world of the *matrix* what Peter Berger's internalization is to language; it is the meaning making process embodied.

True to his assertion that , “No one can be told what the *matrix* is. You have to see it for yourself,” Morpheus loads Neo's and his own consciousness into the teams loading program—a computer simulation not connected to the *matrix*, but one that allows the same degree of simulation. “Your appearance now is what we call residual self-image; it is the mental projection of your digital self.” “This isn't real?” “What is real? How do you define real? If you're talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, what you can taste, and see, then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain.” “This is the world as you know it.” Images that populates the television screen are of a world that could be said to 'map' the late twentieth century's society, culture, and technology: vast numbers of peoples from diverse ethnicities, traffic streaming across a large bridge, and skyscrapers in a large city.

When Morpheus shows Neo “the world as it exists today,” the camera once again takes the viewer through the screen, breaking the barriers of the two-dimensional computer facade that is the *matrix*, and pushing into a three-dimensional world. The world of the *matrix* is a construct world and the other is, as Morpheus so succinctly articulates, “the desert of the real.” It is here that Neo is confronted with the fact that the 'map' is no longer representative of the 'territory' it once represented. Therefore, Morpheus' explanation of reality as

being merely electrical signals interpreted by the brain suggests that Neo's success or failure has to do with his mind's ability to see beyond the construct and know the reality of the sublime.

The conversation between Morpheus and Neo gives the audience a sense of time and location by way of historical and cultural referents. Because the genre of the fantastic, however, is the nexus between the two levels of perception—the uncanny (the mysterious or just plain weird) and the marvelous (the extraordinary, where possibilities are limitless), it is sometimes difficult for the viewer to ascertain associations between signifier and signified, which, in turn, frustrates logical meaning. It is for this reason that *The Matrix* can be said to belong to the genre of the fantasy.

The Wachowski Brothers have constructed the social and spatial cognitive map of late capitalist society. They've illustrated that the person living in the virtual reality world is a floating signifier, disconnected from its referent, which is the real world and the things that exist in it, and incapable of knowing its historical context. *The Matrix* could thus be considered to be presented by way of what Fredric Jameson refers to in his essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" as the "art of language (i.e. Matrix Code) of the simulacrum, or of the pastiche of the stereotypical past, endows present reality and the openness of present history with the spell and distance of a glossy mirage?" (1963).

Suggesting the malleability of all events past and present, *The Matrix* squeezes the chronological code between levels of perception conveyed by the



cultural code and the enigmatic code, each of which have been proposed as distinct signifying structures, as a device of ambivalence to undermine the authority of the cultural code. This movement between the signifying structures is therefore to maintain an uncertain outcome, postponing any possibility of resolution, even after the film has ended, ensuring terminal uncertainty.

The code of action, which in this case incorporates all the chase and fight scenes, is intended to further displace the chronological code by allowing its constant fluid movement between the imaginary and the real through digitally enhanced movement. Inundating the viewer in a perpetual assault of awesome spectacle, the Wachowski Brothers carry out the film's narrative on multiple levels. The filmic space maintains an economically ordered narrative, while the production space is comprised of *uber-bodies* engaged in feats of hyperkinetic motion, charging the sensory level of the audience, leaving us somewhere beyond reality.

The creators, writers, and directors, Larry and Andy Wachowski, pack the 219 scenes with a cornucopia of signs that could have a plethora of potential meanings. These effects are the result of the collaborative efforts of Dan Piponi, bullet time technician, and John Gaeta, visual effects supervisor. Peter X. Feng succinctly articulates the result of their intense work in his essay, "False and Double Consciousness: Race, Virtual Reality and the Assimilation of Hong Kong Action Cinema in *The Matrix*," taken from the book *Aliens R Us*. The film's most

notable special effect, dubbed “bullet time,” is an advanced form of Flow-Motion in which a computer graphic (CG) determines the placement of an array of still cameras with 1/1000<sup>th</sup> of a second shutters (12,000 frames per second).

This effect works closely with the other narrative devices to give the viewer the sensation that s/he is perceiving the visual effect in the super real or the hyper real. It is an effect that puts the viewer in the shoes--in the moment--of the character. Furthermore, the concept of “stillness,” captured via the cinematic medium of “bullet time,” conveys to the viewer the sensation of freeing the mind and overcoming fear—the kind of feeling that can only be attained in a highly centered and meditative state. Truly, when I first saw the film in the theatre, and every time since, “bullet time,” has made me feel like, as the character Neo, everything is lucid. The effect also serves to convey the poststructuralist discourse of awakening to understanding.

We see by the extraordinary powers exhibited by those who have been extracted—freed, or *enlightened*—from the *matrix* that if one is to define oneself as center, s/he must see that the center exists as a function, not necessarily as a part of the structure. Once again drawing on insights from Derrida, viewing the center as thus, mobility would then become the most notable quality, wherein the center/author/subject can exist both inside or outside of the text (878). This mobility would suggest that if we were seeking to define the center by its position in the text, a static position, the center would lose its status (the way Neo had no powers before his extraction from the *matrix*). We would lose the ability to take

the proverbial “step back” and view a situation in all its magnitude and relevant nuances—we would lose clarity, which is very closely associated with enlightenment. So this definition of center as function, having a more ethereal quality, begins to have more relevance.

When the *matrix*’s version of reality is stripped away the notion of self is completely lost so that conditional reality fades away, and what remains defies the ability of language to describe. This idea is more thoroughly articulated in what would be a “last dinner” for the crew when Mouse, played by Matt Doran, poses the “Tasty Wheat” quandary. The group is gathered in the mess hall about to eat the gruel upon which they subsist when Mouse poses his question, “Do you know what it really reminds me of?...*Tasty Wheat*! Did you ever eat Tasty Wheat?” When Switch reminds him that technically no one has actually eaten Tasty Wheat as it is a product exclusive to the *matrix*, Mouse responds vigorously, “That’s exactly my point. Exactly. Because you have to wonder now, how did the machines know what *Tasty Wheat* tasted like, huh? Maybe they got it wrong; maybe what I think *Tasty Wheat* tasted like actually tasted like...er...oatmeal...or tunafish...” As the rather one-sided discussion evolves, the dilemma of simulacrum further unfolds as Mouse concludes “which is why chicken tastes like everything” (*The Matrix*). Baudrillard would say that the Tasty Wheat is “a hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference” (167).

In the same instance, Mouse is articulating his theory of the *matrix's* inability to articulate something so reliant on an individual's interpretation as the taste of food, he is also encapsulating in this filmic metaphor the parallel that William Merrin draws to the writings of Baudrillard and Barthes in his online essay “Did You Ever Eat Tasty Wheat?”: Baudrillard and *The Matrix*.” As Morpheus previously told Neo in the construct, Merrin similarly reminds us how, for Descartes in his *Meditations* (1968) sensory evidence is not enough to substantiate epistemological certainty. Since the fantasy worlds alluded to by the stock references to *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz* and the dream-like state of consciousness implied by the metonymy of the use of the name Morpheus closely correlate to the indeterminacy of a traditional use of language, as told from a poststructuralist's perspective, Descartes proves accurate with his assertion that, “there are no conclusive signs by means of which one can distinguish clearly between being awake and being asleep” (1969: 96-97). Here, the fallibility of a logocentric-oriented language is emphasized by the idea that if one can not quite articulate the appropriate degree of specificity, the danger exists that the item, idea, or ideal may get lumped together with various other psuedo-related or non-related referents. More than simply toying with simulacrum as a plot device, *The Matrix* shows that simulacrum is no mere copy, rather it “contains a positive power which negates both original and copy, both model and reproduction” (1983: 53).

Mouse then contradicts his own disdain for the false reality the *matrix* can engender when he attempts to “arrange a much more personal milieu” with Neo and the girl in the red dress from the agent training program (*The Matrix*). Perhaps it is just his “digital pimp hard at work,” when he says “to deny our own impulses is to deny the very thing that makes us human,” but it establishes Mouse as a mercurial character as both mentor and foil, and seems to indicate that, in some instances with some people, simulation is good enough (*The Matrix*). “Such exchanges,”—Mouse as both mentor and foil to the further enlightenment of Neo—says Carolyn Korsmeyer in her essay “Seeing, Believing, Touching, Truth,” are a “device of the script” that “reveal a conceptual framework employed by *The Matrix*” (45). It is a fantastic example of how the very mechanics of the film work as a metaphor to convey the poststructuralist perspective that drives the point of this thesis; Mouse starts off building a certain expectation among viewers about the role he will play in the film, and by the end of the same conversation, has reversed his implied role with an utter contradiction of philosophy. Mouse is not a bad guy; he is both good and bad, both enlightened (to a degree) and hedonistic—contradicting perspectives that exist simultaneously.

With no one else is this a more pronounced preference than with the one willing to embody the Judas of his troupe just to become a prisoner of the *matrix* once again. Cypher, a member of the band of rebels played by Joe Pantoliano, later betrays Morpheus and Neo, which results in the imprisonment of Morpheus in the *matrix* and the deaths of a number of Morpheus’ crew, and ultimately of

Cypher himself. Trinity may be right when she tells Neo that the *matrix* “cannot tell you who you are,” but who you are seems to be at least in some sense related to who you think you are in the *matrix* (*The Matrix*). In this scene, Cypher plays advocate to this thought when, in negotiation with Agent Smith, he spells out his terms as being, “...I want to be rich. Someone important. Like an actor” (*The Matrix*). Though the importance of actors to the world is strictly a matter of opinion, the fact that Cypher wants to layer his illusion life of the *matrix* with another layer of simulation with the life of an actor, whose career is to simulate, is yet another device the film uses to convey the power and allure of false reality. Once again, the medium becomes the message as the grammar of the dialogue becomes the metaphor when Cypher uses the double negative “I don’t want to remember nothing. Nothing” to articulate his denial of the real, and just how ingrained the simulated still is in his seemingly freed mind (*The Matrix*).

Neo enters the *matrix*, along with one of the only remaining crew members, Trinity, played by Carrie-Anne Moss, and rescues Morpheus. Neo battles the virtual agents, and has a showdown/kung-fu fight with Agent Smith. Through the course of fighting to free Morpheus, he struggles to free himself from the oppressing influence of the *matrix* so that he might acquire strength to defeat his enemy and save his friends. “Wake up, Neo” (*The Matrix*). This succinct phrase encapsulates the plot of the film, as Neo struggles with the problem of being imprisoned in a “material” world enslaving humanity, by perpetuating ignorance in the form of an illusory perception called “the matrix.”

Neo learns about the true structure of reality and about his own true identity, which allows him to break the rules of the false reality world he once perceived to be the real world. Neo is killed and then resurrected, and with this resurrection comes the liberation from the bonds of the *matrix* and the realization of his true place in the *matrix*. With this realization comes seemingly limitless power—power enough to overcome death, control his surroundings, and utterly defeat his foe.

Demonstrating in the final scene that he has, in fact, shrugged of the oppressive conventions of perception, Neo proclaims to the “singular consciousness” that things are about to change, that he is about to show them “a world without rules and controls, without borders or boundaries. A world where anything is possible” (*The Matrix*). He then steps from the phone booth and looks around the false reality in which he stands projecting to the audience the awareness that it is all constructed—that as far as the *matrix* is concerned—he knows that this is just a stage and everything upon just a prop. Then, as an expression of ultimate freedom, Neo flies under the power of his own will. Neo has metaphorically gained a greater understanding of the complexity of language, and the multitude of oftentimes contradictory meanings that exists in the text we call language.

According to *The Matrix*, humanity is controlled by an artificial intelligence it created; thus, humans bear significant responsibility for their enslaved state. This dilemma can be solved through an individual's reorientation

of perspective concerning the material realm. The discourse of the film is one of awakening and awareness. The film constructs a new teaching that challenges its audience to question reality. Whether conscious of it or not, people are, to some degree, imprisoned by the seemingly ethereal borders of a logocentric language. It is the nature of humans to develop a false reality—an unclear image of ourselves, the world around us, and our place in it—based on the perfunctory nature of language; however, the rules, like language and any context within which it might be used, are precarious. Humanity's state of ignorance is largely of its own making.

This false perception is so realistic that those trapped within do not have any idea that they are trapped in any way. It is so convincing and so realistic because each person within the matrix of language has been born and has died knowing this falsehood to be the truth. The *matrix* is not a lie lurking in the shadows; it is, rather, a lie that is utterly convincing because it permeates every moment of existence within it. The boundaries between any given text and the text of language itself are not distinct, but of an ethereal quality where meanings and contexts are always shifting.

The rhetoric of this film is carried by the plot, and implied by the action—virtually every convention and tradition of culture, society, economics, and politics is a set of subtle tryptophan shackles, constraining us with complacency and apathy; language is the establishing and facilitating tool of these conventions and traditions. There may be levels of metaphysical reality beyond what we can



ordinarily perceive, and the film urges us to open ourselves to the possibility of awakening to them. In the context of *The Matrix*, this a rather Jamesonian concept, would seem to suggest that Neo must simultaneously see the virtual reality of the *matrix*, the underlying code that writes and informs it, the bodies that are confined by it, the minds that are controlled by it, and the machines that generate it. Each and every one of these embodiments is radically different and co-exist at the same moment. Neo's success depends on his ability to see and understand all of these embodiments simultaneously.

We will never have a final solution, it seems, to the polysemic conundrum of our intimate and social existence. Because the allure of the life-world viewed and lived with the notion that reality itself is no more than the conjectural effect of structural relations, no theory on how to resist the T-chart approach to perceiving reality may be able to bust the myth of the matrix. Consequently, finding one's true place in time and space is always a precarious journey using a limited map with incomplete referents. It's virtually impossible to reach the destination called freedom when you have never been there before and you do not know what it looks like. Neither can anyone show you how to get there, since both the journey and the destination are different for each of us.

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